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## THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE: A Southern Baptist Perspective

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Baptists have always advocated soul freedom, or liberty of conscience, in matters of religion. As such, Baptists affirm the principle of a free church in a free state, or as it has come to be more commonly known in the United States, the separation of church and state. This is true of Southern Baptists, who summarize our position in *The Baptist Faith and Message* (2000):

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it. *Church and state should be separate.* The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends. The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. *A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal*, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.<sup>1</sup>

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The key phrases, highlighted above in italics, are “Church and state should be separate” and “A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal.” While these phrases might seem clear enough, over the past couple of generations the idea of church-state separation has at times been controversial among Southern Baptists—at times for good reasons.

In the following pages, I offer a Southern Baptist perspective on the separation of church and state. Note that I am not claiming to advance “the” Southern Baptist position. As is the case with nearly any idea, including historic Baptist distinctives, Southern Baptists are not unanimous in our understanding of church-state separation.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, I want to advance a distinctively Baptist version of this principle that is worth defending against contemporary threats, regardless of the direction from which they come.

Like many of our Baptist forebears, I argue that the formal separation of church and state remains the best provisional arrangement for safeguarding the principle of religious liberty for all people. When there is full religious liberty, there is less occasion for the state to introduce coercion or confusion into matters of ultimate importance. Rightly understood, the separation of church and state guarantees the freedom of all people, regardless of their religious commitments (or lack thereof), to practice those commitments in accordance with their conscience. It also guarantees the freedom of believers to share the truth of the gospel with non-believers, making the best case we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3) in the midst of a world of competing religious claims. For Baptists, church-state separation is not first and foremost about how to properly interpret a constitutional principle or how to best to embody one of our historically cherished distinctives, but it is ultimately about the Great Commission to proclaim the good news of King Jesus and make disciples from among all people.

In this essay, I begin by surveying early Baptist understandings of church and state. This will be familiar ground for many readers. I then focus upon several noteworthy Southern Baptists who have written on this topic over the past century. Though all Southern Baptists affirmed religious liberty,

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<sup>1</sup>“The Baptist Faith and Message 2000,” Article XVII: Religious Liberty, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#xvii-religious-liberty>.

<sup>2</sup>For more on this recurring theme of diversity vis-à-vis Baptist distinctives, see Nathan A. Finn, “Debating Baptist Identities: Description and Prescription in the American South,” in *Mirrors and Microscopes: Historical Perceptions of Baptists*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2015), 173–87.

by the 1970s the issue had become controversial, leading to competing accounts of church-state separation. I will close with a call for Southern Baptists to remain committed to the principle of a free church in a free state for the sake of Great Commission faithfulness.

### I. EARLY BAPTISTS AND CHURCH-STATE SEPARATION

In 1612, the English Baptist pioneer Thomas Helwys (died ca. 1616) established the first Baptist church on English soil in Spitalfields, which is now a district in the East End of London. That same year, Helwys wrote *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, wherein he argued for liberty of conscience in matters of religion. He did not argue for mere religious toleration, nor did he limit this freedom to orthodox Christians, but rather advocated for religious freedom for all people, including heretics, Jews, and Muslims. This was a radical claim at the time, made the more remarkable by Helwys's handwritten inscription in the copy he sent to King James I:

The king is a mortal man and not God, therefore he has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them. If the king has authority to make spiritual lords and laws, then he is an immortal God and not a mortal man.<sup>3</sup>

Helwys was imprisoned for his controversial beliefs, eventually dying in London's Newgate Prison around 1616. But the die was cast. Since the early 1600s, Baptists have remained tireless defenders of soul freedom.

In the generation after Helwys, Baptists in Colonial New England were making a similar case for religious liberty. Roger Williams (1603–83) and John Clarke (1609–76) are considered the co-founders of the colony of Rhode Island. Each man fled Massachusetts in search of greater religious freedom than was possible under the Puritan establishment. Each subsequently became a Baptist, founding the first two Baptist churches in the English colonies in Providence and Newport, respectively. Each also wrote in defense of religious liberty. In 1644, Williams penned *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, followed by Clarke's *Ill Newes from New England* in 1652. Both books catalogued religious persecution of Baptists and other religious dissenters and made the case for liberty of conscience.

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Helwys, "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity," in *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*, ed. Joe Early Jr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 156.

Williams went further, however, in arguing for a clear distinction between the “garden” of the church and the “wilderness” of the world. In a follow-up work to *The Bloudy Tenent*, Williams played off of this metaphor when advocating for a “hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world.”<sup>4</sup> A century and a half later, President Thomas Jefferson would invoke similar language when he claimed the First Amendment to the US Constitution created a “wall of separation between Church & State” in his 1802 letter to the Baptists in Danbury, CT.<sup>5</sup>

Since the time of Williams, the consensus among Baptists in America is that the best way to protect religious liberty is to champion the formal separation of church and state. Baptists the world over echo these sentiments, whether they are free citizens of liberal nations that adhere to church-state separation or oppressed minorities struggling to worship freely under atheistic or theocratic regimes.<sup>6</sup> But the separation of church and state has enjoyed particular resonance with Baptists in America. This is partly because the First Amendment rejects a religious establishment when it says “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Baptists in the United States appreciate that one of their cherished principles is enshrined in the Constitution. Second, and perhaps just as important, Baptists claim to have played a small but strategic role in influencing the course of the early American history of disestablishment.

In 1773, New England Baptist minister Isaac Backus (1724–1806) authored *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty Against the Oppressions of the Present Day*. In this treatise, Backus echoed Williams’s earlier argument for the separation of church and state to protect religious liberty against the coercive Congregationalist establishment. Backus was troubled that Baptists in New England continued to be persecuted for their dissenting beliefs. He petitioned the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental

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<sup>4</sup>Roger Williams, “Mr. Cotton’s Letter, Lately Printed, Examined and Answered,” in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 1, eds. Reuben Aldridge Guild and James Hammond Trumbull (Providence, RI: Narragansett Club, 1866; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 392.

<sup>5</sup>“Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists,” Library of Congress, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>.

<sup>6</sup>For example, in 1960 the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) adopted a “Resolution on Separation of Church and State,” available online at <https://www.baptistworld.org/resolution-on-separation-of-church-and-state/> (accessed July 27, 2021). This resolution was reaffirmed by the BWA in 2020. See also “Baptist World Alliance Study Document and Manifesto on Religious Liberty,” *Journal of Church and State* 2.2 (November 1960): 156–60.

Congress to end compulsory tithes to support the establishment and later voiced his approval of the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights while attending the Massachusetts convention that ratified the US Constitution in 1788. As Brandon O'Brien argues, "[Backus] fought for more than half a century to make America a nation that protects every citizen's right to exercise their religion according to their conscience."<sup>7</sup>

Also in 1788, the Baptist evangelist John Leland (1754–1841) met with James Madison, who was seeking Baptist support for his election to the House of Representatives from Virginia. Leland had contemplated running in the election himself to promote the cause of soul freedom. The two men came to an agreement: Leland withdrew from the race and encouraged Baptists to vote for Madison in exchange for Madison championing the same sort of understanding of full religious liberty associated with Jefferson, a friend of both men and Madison's close political ally. Madison was elected and subsequently drafted the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights, which was amended to the US Constitution in 1789 and ratified by the requisite number of states in 1791. John Ragosta argues that the views of the Baptists remained "particularly weighty" for Madison throughout the religious liberty debates in Virginia and eventual adoption of the First Amendment.<sup>8</sup>

The thinking of Williams, Backus, and Leland continues to influence how Baptists in America think about religious liberty and church-state separation. Among Southern Baptists, the turn of the twentieth century introduced a chorus of additional voices that have been gradually added to the "cloud of witnesses" for soul freedom that continues to the present day. In the next section, I will highlight how a selection of key Southern Baptist thinkers have discussed the separation of church and state across the century or so from 1908 to 2015. This list should be taken as representative rather than exhaustive, since numerous thoughtful Southern Baptists have written on the importance of a free church in a free state.

## II. SOUTHERN BAPTIST VOICES

E. Y. Mullins (1860–1928) was almost certainly one of the most influential Southern Baptist theologians during his lifetime and arguably the

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<sup>7</sup>Brandon O'Brien, *Demanding Liberty: An Untold Story of American Religious Freedom* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018), 5.

<sup>8</sup>See John A. Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 168.

entire twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> As Albert Mohler argues, “Mullins—more than any other writing theologian among Southern Baptists—remains the one figure against whom almost any other theologian is compared.”<sup>10</sup> His numerous noteworthy writings included *The Axioms of Religion* (1908), a constructive interpretation of Baptist distinctives, and *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (1917), a widely adopted theology textbook. Mullins was also one of the leading denominational statesmen of his era. From 1899 until his death, Mullins served as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He also served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921 to 1924, chaired the committee that drafted the Baptist Faith and Message in 1925, and was president of the Baptist World Alliance from 1923 to 1928.

Mullins addressed the separation of church and state in *The Axioms of Religion*, devoting an entire chapter to the topic “The Religio-Civic Axiom: A Free Church in a Free State.”<sup>11</sup> Mullins argued of Baptists, “There has never been a time in their history, so far as that history is known to us, when they wavered in their doctrine of a free Church in a free State.”<sup>12</sup> He discussed the history of the modern religious establishment in England, contrasting this view of church and state with the views of Roger Williams and the Virginia Baptists. Mullins suggested the Baptists have made a significant contribution to western civilization with their separationist perspective. Mullins conceded that in a perfect society church and state might be united, though because no such society exists, the functions of church and state must remain separate. This separation relates to their different functions. Mullins argued the church is a voluntary spiritual organization while the state is a temporal organization that compels obedience. Thus, while church and state are compatible, in the sense that they can co-exist, the church is its own holy commonwealth that is free and independent of state control. Mullins closed his chapter by applying the principle of church-state separation to the question of tax exemption

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<sup>9</sup>The most important book-length study of Mullins life and legacy is William J. Ellis, *A Man of Books and a Man of the People: E. Y. Mullins and the Crisis of Moderate Southern Baptist Leadership* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985). The best short introduction to Mullins’s thought is Fisher Humphreys, “E.Y. Mullins,” in *Baptist Theologians*, eds. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 330–50.

<sup>10</sup>R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Baptist Theology at the Crossroads: The Legacy of E.Y. Mullins,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3.4 (Winter 1999): 17.

<sup>11</sup>E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1908), 185–200.

<sup>12</sup>Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 189

for religious property, arguing for exemptions on the logic that the state is not sovereign over the church.

One of Mullins's contemporaries was George W. Truett (1867–1944), longtime pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas.<sup>13</sup> Like Mullins, Truett was a denominational statesman who served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1927 to 1929 and the Baptist World Alliance from 1934–1939. Unlike Mullins, Truett was more of a preacher than a theologian. He was widely considered one of the most eloquent pulpiteers of his era. During World War I in 1918, Truett was invited by President Woodrow Wilson to serve as one of twenty American ministers that were selected to preach to Allied forces in Europe, under the sponsorship of the YMCA. All of Truett's books were sermon anthologies, many of which have been reprinted periodically because of their enduring popularity. In an obituary published in *The Christian Century*, J. M. Dawson wrote of Truett, "The consensus at the time of his passing ascribed Dr. Truett's extraordinary powers to his eloquence, his brotherliness toward all men and his passion for souls."<sup>14</sup>

Truett's most noteworthy sermon was his address "Baptists and Religious Liberty," which he preached on May 16, 1920, from the east steps of the US Capitol while the Southern Baptist Convention was holding its annual meeting in Washington, DC.<sup>15</sup> Like Mullins, Truett argued that religious liberty is the supreme Baptist contribution to the world. Baptists are not satisfied with mere religious toleration, which concedes too much power to the state, but rather affirm absolute religious liberty as a matter of principle and a gift from God. Drawing upon Jesus's command in Matthew 22:21 to "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (KJV), Truett argued for the "divorcement" (separation) of church and state. This biblical model of separation was rejected by Constantinianism, which continued in various forms into the Reformation period, before being recovered by the modern Baptists. Far from church-state separation leading to the absence of a religious witness

<sup>13</sup>The standard scholarly biography of Truett is Keith E. Durso, *Thy Will Be Done: A Biography of George W. Truett* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup>J. M. Dawson, "Truett's Death Moves All Texas," *The Christian Century* (July 26, 1944): 880.

<sup>15</sup>"Baptists and Religious Liberty" was subsequently published in Truett's sermon anthology *God's Call to America and Other Addresses Comprising Special Orations Delivered on Widely Varying Occasions* (New York: George H. Doran, 1923). It has since been reprinted numerous times in various formats. This paragraph engages with the edition published electronically by the "Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty," accessed July 13, 2021, <https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Baptists-and-Religious-Liberty.pdf>.



in the public square, Truett believed this arrangement fosters the freedom to promote religious education and evangelistic advance.

Both Mullins and Truett wrote on church-state separation at a time of great cultural optimism. Each man was a proponent of American exceptionalism who closely identified American democracy with Baptist democracy.<sup>16</sup> Though neither would likely have appreciated the concept of a civil religion because of their Baptist sensibilities, both articulated their views on church and state within a milieu that was still shaped profoundly by the broadly and generically Protestant assumptions that had characterized American culture since its founding.<sup>17</sup> That consensus would remain largely unchallenged through the early postwar years and into the Eisenhower Administration. In 1954, Congress added the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance, followed two years later by a joint resolution adopting “In God We Trust” as the national motto of the United States. Both moves were attempts to position the United States as a righteous counterpart to the atheistic communism of the Soviet Union.

Yet some Baptists were uncomfortable with the God and Country emphasis of the early Cold War era. For example, Joseph M. Dawson (1879–1973) emerged as the leading Southern Baptist voice for the separation of church and state during the mid-twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Dawson served for over thirty years as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas (1915–1946), during which time he was also a respected denominational leader. Following his retirement from pastoral ministry, Dawson served from 1946 to 1953 as the founding executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (BJC), which represented the interests of several Baptist denominations in Washington, with emphasis on matters of religious liberty. In 1957, Baylor University established what is now the J. M. Dawson Institute for Church-State Studies to honor Dawson’s contributions to the topic.

Two of Dawson’s books, *Separate Church and State Now* (1948) and *America’s Way in Church, State and Society* (1953), anticipated changes that would come to American culture in the 1960s. Motivated both by his

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<sup>16</sup>See Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 178.

<sup>17</sup>For a history and critique of American civil religion, see John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015).

<sup>18</sup>The most important study of Dawson’s life and thought is Travis Lamar Summerlin, “Church-State Relations in the Thought of Joseph Martin Dawson” (PhD diss., Baylor University, 1984). See also James Leo Garrett Jr., “Joseph Martin Dawson: Pastor, Author, Denominational Leader, Social Activist,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 14, no. 4 (October 1979): 7–15.

commitment to Baptist principles and concerns over potential government aid to Catholic parochial schools and the possibility of a US ambassador to the Vatican, Dawson advocated for the strict separation of church and state.<sup>19</sup> During this same time, a number of leaders primarily from main-line Protestant traditions came together to form Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. It is noteworthy that Dawson served as the first executive director of Americans United from 1947 to 1948, since the relationship between the two organizations would provoke considerable controversy forty years later. Dawson's final major work, *Baptists and the American Republic* (1956), was a study of Baptist influence on American culture, with emphasis on church-state separation.

The two decades between 1945 and 1965 were a transitional period marked by growing international tensions related to the Cold War, armed conflicts in Southeast Asia that were proxies for the Cold War, the emerging Civil Rights movement, persistent technological advances, government expansion, and significant economic growth that raised the standard of living in the United States. Within that milieu, a series of influential Supreme Court decisions drew upon Jefferson's "wall of separation" metaphor to codify the strict separation of church and state as the best way to interpret the First Amendment.<sup>20</sup> In *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947), the Court upheld a New Jersey statute that used taxpayer funds to bus children to private Catholic schools. However, in its majority opinion—written by Associate Justice Hugo Black, a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher from Alabama—the Court argued the statute was constitutional precisely because it did not violate the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment and the wall of separation it erected between church and state.<sup>21</sup> In *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), the Court ruled that school-spon-

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<sup>19</sup>Protestant antipathy toward Catholicism has deep roots in American history and has often contributed to arguments in favor of the strict separation of church and state. See Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup>There continues to be debate among historians and legal scholars about the meaning of Jefferson's metaphor, its relationship to the First Amendment, and its relevance for contemporary jurisprudence related to church and state. For example, Philip Hamburger and Daniel Dreisbach have raised questions about the strict separationist interpretation and application of Jefferson's words. See Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), and Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup>For more on Black, see Barbara Perry, "Justice Hugo Black and the 'Wall of Separation Between Church and State,'" *Journal of Church and State* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 55–72. Scholars of Black debate whether his Baptist beliefs or his anti-Catholic sensibilities had the greater impact upon

sored prayer in public schools was unconstitutional because it violated the Establishment Clause. Again, Black wrote the majority opinion. Two additional cases in 1963 struck down teacher-led Bible reading and the Lord's Prayer using the same reasoning. While many fundamentalists attacked these decisions, which contributed to the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s, Southern Baptist editorials and resolutions at the time praised the Court for upholding church-state separation.<sup>22</sup>

The Dawson-Black view of church-state separation continued to be the position of the Baptist Joint Committee of Public Affairs through the presidential tenures of C. Emanuel Carlson (1954–1971) and James E. Wood Jr. (1972–1980). However, during James Dunn's turn as president of the BJCPA (1981–1999), the separation of church and state became a hotly contested topic among Southern Baptists. The early Dunn years coincided with both the early days of the Inerrancy Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention and the rise of the aforementioned Religious Right within the Republican Party.<sup>23</sup> The latter was a movement that mobilized conservative Protestants to become active in the Republican Party to advocate against elective abortion, the normalization of homosexuality, and the secularization of the public square. The Religious Right became a key constituent within the Republican coalition that elected Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 and 1984 and fueled the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994. In general, the Religious Right responded negatively to the strict separatist view of church-state separation advanced by the Supreme Court in the 1960s, in part because many of them were committed to the idea that America has always had a special place in God's divine plans.<sup>24</sup>

For Southern Baptists, the debate about church and state was somewhat more complicated. During the final quarter of the twentieth century, there were at least three general perspectives among Southern Baptists when it came to church-state separation and the closely related question

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how he viewed the relationship between public schools and church-state separation.

<sup>22</sup>Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62–67.

<sup>23</sup>For an overview of the Inerrancy Controversy from a conservative perspective, see Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: B&H, 2000). For a moderate interpretation, see Bill Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

<sup>24</sup>William C. Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway, 1996), 371–85.

of America's Christian identity.<sup>25</sup> The first two views were common among SBC conservatives and could be understood as "hard" and "soft" forms of Christian nationalism.<sup>26</sup> Some believed that America was founded as an explicitly Christian nation as part of God's divine plan. This view was common within the wider Christian Right, as reflected in Peter Marshall's 1977 bestseller *The Light and the Glory*, Christian private school and home-school history curricula, and the "soft reconstructionism" of David Barton's controversial Wallbuilders organization.<sup>27</sup> Many Baptist laypeople and at least some pastors affirmed that America was, by design, a Christian nation.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes proponents of this view rejected in principle church-state separation, identifying the concept with secular humanism more than the Baptist tradition. For example, longtime SBC leader W. A. Criswell memorably referred to the separation of church and state as "the figment of some infidel's imagination" during a 1984 television interview, putting Criswell at odds with the historic Baptist position.<sup>29</sup>

A second view of American history, more prominent among conservative Southern Baptist scholars, was that America was not founded as an explicitly Christian nation, but that the Judeo-Christian tradition had deeply influenced the nation's historic identity, a fact that should be acknowledged and celebrated. Barry Hankins argues this perspective was common among Baptist public intellectuals, who understood it to be more historically faithful than the idea that America was founded as a Christian nation.<sup>30</sup> Most Southern Baptists of this persuasion embraced an "accommodationist" view of church and state.<sup>31</sup> Accommodationists

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<sup>25</sup>Portions of the following three paragraphs are adapted from Nathan A. Finn, "The Christian Right: From Reagan to Trump," in *Explorations in Baptist Political Theology*, eds. Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker (Nashville: B&H, forthcoming.)

<sup>26</sup>For a conservative and baptistic critique of Christian Nationalism, see Paul D. Miller, *Christianity and the American Nation: Power and Principle in Competing Christian Visions of American Nationhood* (Downers Grove: IVP, forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup>See John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 60–67; Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 39, 79–118.

<sup>28</sup>Texas pastor and former SBC President Jimmy Draper was the most noteworthy pastoral defender of this view. See James T. Draper and Forrest E. Watson, *If the Foundation Be Destroyed* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

<sup>29</sup>Cited in William Estep, *The Revolution within the Revolution: The First Amendment in Historical Context, 1612–1789* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 9.

<sup>30</sup>Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 63–64.

<sup>31</sup>See Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 139–64. Legal scholar Carl Esbeck calls accommodationism "institutional separationism," contrasting it with five other positions on church and state. See Carl H. Esbeck, "A Typology of Church-State Relations in Current American Thought," *Faith*

rejected the idea of a state-sponsored religion, but believed the government should adopt a generally friendly posture toward religion. As a rule, they emphasized the “Free Exercise” Clause of the First Amendment more so than the antiestablishment clause, though as Baptists they certainly opposed any sort of religious establishment. America was not a Christian nation, but rather was a nation of Christians, and the Constitution guaranteed their (and others’) soul freedom.

The third view, what Carl Esbeck calls “strict separationism,” argued America was officially a secular nation, albeit one influenced significantly by Christians (especially Protestants) for much of its history.<sup>32</sup> However, strict separationists rejected both hard and soft forms of Christian Nationalism, arguing that America should remain neutral toward religion. They identified their view of church and state with earlier Baptist thinkers from Williams through Truett. Dunn was the leading advocate of this perspective, arguing that strict separationism was the historic Baptist position and that accommodationists had sold out to the Religious Right.<sup>33</sup> Conservative critics maintained Dunn and the BJCPA allied themselves too often with leftwing *secularist* organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the renamed Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, while also seeming embarrassed at times about overt displays of patriotism, and were more generally supportive of progressive positions on social issues (especially abortion and LGBTQ+).

In 1988, Richard Land was elected president of the Christian Life Commission, the Southern Baptist agency that was tasked with speaking to the Convention on ethical matters and social concerns.<sup>34</sup> Land had previously served as a faculty member at Criswell College and worked as an advisor to Texas Governor Bill Clements. He had also been a member of the Public Affairs Committee, which represented the Convention’s interests on the Baptist Joint Committee. When Southern Baptists voted to defund the BJCPA in 1991, the Christian Life Commission was reassigned the responsibility of representing the SBC in matters of religious liberty. In 1997, the name of the entity was changed to the Ethics and

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*and Mission* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 12–14.

<sup>32</sup>Esbeck, “Typology of Church-State Relations,” 7–9.

<sup>33</sup>For more on Dunn, see Aaron Douglas Weaver, *James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), and Aaron Douglas Weaver, ed., *A Baptist Vision of Religious Liberty and Free and Faithful Politics: The Words and Writings of James M. Dunn* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018).

<sup>34</sup>For more on Land, see Jerry Sutton, *A Matter of Conviction: A History of Southern Baptist Engagement with the Culture* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 271–420.

Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). Land served as president of ERLC from 1988 to 2013. He was also active in public life beyond the SBC. For example, Land was appointed a commissioner to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom by President George W. Bush.

Reflecting his academic background, Land edited collections of scholarly essays on Christianity and politics that originated as addresses given at seminars hosted by ERLC, in addition to the many other essays he published elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> But Land proved especially adept at bridging the gaps between the academy, the church, and faith-inspired activism. As a leading public intellectual within the Religious Right, Land was frequently interviewed by news outlets. He also hosted a live syndicated radio program from 2002 to 2012, frequently penned op-ed pieces for national publications, and wrote several popular books that advocated a socially conservative vision for America. Land's book *The Divided States of America? What Liberals and Conservatives Are Missing in the God-and-Country Shouting Match* (2007) was a popular account of his accommodationist views of church and state, albeit one rooted in Land's appreciation for Baptist history and the close tie between church-state separation and the freedom to practice and proclaim Christian truth.

In 2013, Russell Moore became the president of ERLC, a position he held until 2021. Moore came to ERLC from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he taught theology and served as chief academic officer for nearly a decade. Moore's position on church and state did not perfectly align with Land's accommodationism or Dunn's strict separationism.<sup>36</sup> Instead, he affirmed a view similar to what Esbeck calls "freewill separationism," which argues for state neutrality toward religion, but envisions the church as having a prophetic posture toward the state.<sup>37</sup> Like Land, Moore emphasized the importance of orthodox Christian voices contributing vigorously to public discourse and advocating for the common good. Like Dunn, Moore was concerned that some forms of accommodationism (at least in the wider culture) took an overly positive outlook toward civil religion. Moore emphasized the kingdom of God, contrasting it with

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<sup>35</sup>For example, see Richard D. Land and Louis A. Moore, eds., *Christian Citizens: The Rights and Responsibilities of Dual Citizenship* (Nashville: B&H, 1994), and Richard D. Land and Lee Holloway, eds., *Christians in the Public Square: Faith in Practice?* (Nashville: ERLC, 1996).

<sup>36</sup>Russell D. Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 138–60. See also Russell Moore, "What Does the Gospel Say?" in *The Gospel & Religious Liberty*, Gospel for Life, eds., Russell Moore and Andrew T. Walker (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 25–40.

<sup>37</sup>Esbeck, "Typology of Church-State Relations," 9–12.

earthly kingdoms—including the United States. For Moore, the separation of church and state was primarily a question of mission. Church-state separation preserves soul freedom, thus providing the best cultural context for authentic faith to flourish and the gospel to advance.

### III. THE GREAT COMMISSION AND CHURCH-STATE SEPARATION

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, it has never been more important for Southern Baptists to maintain our historic commitment to the separation of church and state. The secularist left and their sympathizers continue to threaten religious liberty in the United States, especially the freedom of theologically and morally orthodox Christians. Often, these threats are in response to Christians maintaining traditional views of gender and marriage in public ways that run afoul of the progressive status quo, as in the much-publicized cases of Colorado baker Jack Phillips and Washington florist Barronelle Stutzman.<sup>38</sup> Religious freedom, historic Christian views of marriage and family, and the sanctity of human life are often intertwined in both public controversies and legal challenges, creating the need for Southern Baptists and other orthodox believers across ecclesial traditions to link arms for the sake of human flourishing.<sup>39</sup> Organizations such as Alliance Defending Freedom, Becket, the Thomas More Society, and Southern Baptists' own Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (among others) are on the front lines of defending religious freedom for all from (primarily) threats from the leftwing end of the ideological spectrum.

However, such threats do not only come from the secularist left. Some voices on the right side of the aisle, which at times cloak their arguments in Christian language, also threaten religious liberty by rejecting or downplaying the importance of church-state separation. For example, in the 2010s a number of communities passed local ordinances to prevent Muslims

<sup>38</sup>See R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Gathering Storm: Religious Liberty in the Wake of Sexual Revolution," in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, 2nd ed., eds. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 169–80.

<sup>39</sup>In 2009, a group of Christian leaders adopted "The Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conference" as one way to unite believers around life, marriage, and liberty. The statement is available online at <https://www.manhattandeclaration.org/> (accessed July 27, 2021). For further reflections on "The Manhattan Declaration" and its legacy, see David S. Dockery and John Stonestreet, ed., *Life, Marriage, and Religious Liberty: What Belongs to God, What Belongs to Caesar* (New York: Post Hill, 2019), and Nathan A. Finn, "The Manhattan Declaration: Ten Years Later," Baptist Press (November 20, 2019), accessed July 27, 2021, <http://m.bpnews.net/53946/firstperson-the-manhattan-declaration-ten-years-later>.

from building mosques. The ERLC rightly defended Muslims against challenges to their religious freedom, noting that a threat to their liberty was a potential threat to the liberty others—including Baptists. As Moore argued in response to a question from a concerned Southern Baptist, “[W]hen you have a government that says, ‘We can decide whether or not a house of worship is being constructed based upon the theological beliefs of that house of worship,’ then there are going to be Southern Baptist churches in San Francisco and New York and throughout this country who are not going to be able to build.”<sup>40</sup> Because of these rightwing challenges, Southern Baptists committed to our historic position on church and state must make clear we are not embracing, even implicitly, what Richard John Neuhaus famously described as a “naked public square” wherein religious claims are ruled out of bounds in principle.<sup>41</sup> Instead, by defending the soul freedom of unbelievers to hold incorrect or irreligious views, we are also defending the freedom of believers to worship and witness in accordance with their conscience.

Land is surely correct that the Judeo-Christian tradition has deeply shaped American history and that secularist trends since the mid-twentieth century—including some that affected court decisions about church and state—have created a post-Christian and increasingly anti-Christian context. We are right to lament the waning of the Christian worldview in the public square. But Moore is also correct that this very shift means Southern Baptists and other orthodox Christians should increasingly think of ourselves as a prophetic moral minority rather than beleaguered moral majority. We are right to see this as an opportunity to clarify (and perhaps in some cases purify) our public witness. Moving forward, Southern Baptists should think of the separation of church and state as a missional principle rooted in God’s character and his Great Commission of global disciple-making, a posture that I am confident both Land and Moore would unhesitatingly affirm.<sup>42</sup>

J. M. Dawson has rightly argued that “The principle of church-state

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<sup>40</sup>Tom Strode, “ERLC’s Moore defends Religious Freedom for Muslims,” Baptist Press (June 16, 2016), accessed July 27, 2021, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/erlcs-moore-defends-religious-freedom-for-muslims/>.

<sup>41</sup>Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>42</sup>More recently, Andrew Walker has argued that religious liberty should be approached from a missiological perspective in a pluralistic age. See Andrew T. Walker, *Liberty for All: Defending Everyone’s Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2021), 145–217. See also Evan Lenow, “Religious Liberty and the Gospel,” in *First Freedom*, 111–26.



separation rested originally upon evangelical faith in personal regeneration, although many people at the time were not aware of the fact.<sup>43</sup> This remains the case today, even among many Baptists. Pastors and other ministry leaders must remind the present generation of Southern Baptists that the separation of church and state, rightly understood, is ultimately about creating a context where all people are free to follow their conscience in matters of religion. In turn, this provides Southern Baptists and other Christians with the freedom to proclaim the Kingship of Jesus Christ and call upon all men and women to freely bow the knee to him through repentance and faith rather than coercion or compulsion. This arrangement, which Southern Baptist ethicist Andrew Walker memorably refers to as “Christian secularism,” is by no means permanent, since it will not continue into the eschaton.<sup>44</sup> But until that day when, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15), we continue to champion religious freedom for all people and the separation of church and state.



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<sup>43</sup>Joseph Martin Dawson, *Baptists and the American Republic* (Nashville: Broadman, 1956), 53.

<sup>44</sup>Walker, *Liberty for All*, 60.